



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From the Rt Hon Andrew Stephenson CBE MP
Minister of State for Health and Secondary Care*

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Iain Stewart MP

By email to: iain.stewart.mp@parliament.uk

10 January 2024

Dear Iain,

Thank you for your correspondence of 19 December on behalf of a number of your constituents about the International Health Regulations 2005 (IHR).

I am grateful to you for raising your constituents' concerns.

The IHR are an existing international legal instrument to which the UK is party; they form a key part of the global health security system to prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease.

The Government wants to ensure that World Health Organization (WHO) member states' obligations under the IHR remain fit for purpose and take into consideration the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The best way to protect the UK from the next pandemic is by ensuring all member states can contain and respond to outbreaks through compliance with strengthened IHR. The Government is therefore supporting the process of agreeing targeted amendments of the IHR as a means of strengthening preparedness for and response to future health emergencies.

As the world's global health agency, the WHO is the clear institutional home for member states to agree targeted amendments to the IHR. It is primarily through the WHO that member states share with each other information on disease outbreaks around the world, share best practice on how to counter health threats and emergencies, and make commitments to each other to undertake activities to promote health and to avoid activities that could be detrimental to health. The UK has long partnered with the WHO and fellow member states to tackle the world's most pressing health challenges.

WHO member states, including the UK, agreed a process to negotiate and agree targeted amendments to the IHR at the 75th World Health Assembly (WHA) and, by consensus, adopted one process-related amendment under Article 59 of the IHR. The process includes the ability of member states to submit proposed amendments for consideration and the formation of the Working Group on Amendments to the IHR (WGIHR), made up of all WHO member states, including the UK, through which the amendments would be negotiated and agreed.

These amendments shorten the timeframe for future amendments to the IHR to come into force to 12 rather than 24 months, with the possibility to extend up to 24 months, and for member states to reject or reserve on them within ten rather than 18 months.

These amendments apply only to future member state-agreed amendments to the IHR. The UK supports the amendments as they aim to improve the timeliness of member states' implementation of and compliance with the IHR, which helps to better protect the UK from future public health events, including pandemics.

The Government continues to engage in the member-state-led WGIHR negotiation process, working with our international partners to secure the best outcomes for the UK, as a means of strengthening preparedness for and response to future global health emergencies. Our priorities for the 300-plus proposed amendments continue to include increasing compliance with the IHR, improving transparency and speeding up timeliness of reporting. The amendments to the IHR are still subject to discussion and negotiation through the WGIHR and none have yet been agreed. Member states agreed to submit a package of agreed amendments to the WHA in May. The proposed amendments to the IHR and relevant papers, including reports, are available publicly at <https://apps.who.int/gb/wgihr>.

Throughout these negotiations, the Government has been and will continue to be clear that the UK will not agree any amendments to the IHR that would cede sovereignty to make domestic decisions on national measures concerning public health, such as domestic immunisation programme rollouts and other similar measures.

Any new or amended domestic legislation necessary to reflect new international obligations under the regulations would be made through the applicable Parliamentary process. In all circumstances, the sovereignty of the UK Parliament would remain unchanged.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours sincerely,



**THE RT HON ANDREW STEPHENSON CBE MP
MINISTER OF STATE**